

**Western Australia Trip, Perth WA, October 2004:**  
**Meetings of the Forest Fire Management Group and**  
**Fire Equipment Development Group;**  
**Annual Conference of the**  
**Australasian Fire Authorities Council and**  
**Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre**

**Submitted by Grant Beebe, BLM, NIFC**

**Other BLM Travelers:**

Larry Hamilton, Director, BLM National Office of Fire and Aviation, NIFC

**Dates and Location(s) of Travel:**

Perth, WA, Australia, October 2-October 15, 2004

**Purpose/Objectives of Trip:**

The purposes of the trip were to attend meetings of New Zealand/Australian wildfire management coordination group (FFMG--similar to NWCG) and New Zealand/Australian wildfire equipment development group (FEDOG); and to attend the annual conference of AFAC, a group of Australian, New Zealand, and SE Asian fire, emergency services, and land management agencies, and the first annual conference of Bushfire CRC, an Australian wildfire research group.

Objectives included furthering talks between primary U.S. and Australian/New Zealand wildfire agencies regarding future cooperation. Since 2000, the three nations have been exchanging personnel and expertise during extreme wildfire episodes. While the exchanges have been relatively successful, regular contact between the parties to these international agreements is necessary to insure continued success.

Past exchanges of fire equipment development personnel have resulted in rapid technological advances on both sides of the Pacific. The fire equipment meeting represented an opportunity to efficiently gather information on the latest Australian and New Zealand technological advances since the last study tour.

The AFAC and Bushfire CRC conferences brought together the finest Australasian researchers, suppression specialists, and prescribed fire practitioners for two days of presentations and poster sessions. Australian wildfire concerns are similar to those in the U.S.: fires in the wildland urban interface, excessive fuels buildup, public concern over risk and management practices. The U.S. wildfire community would be remiss to ignore the large body of research, the technological innovation, and the latest land and fire management practices coming out of Australia and New Zealand.

**Brief Description of Itinerary/Activities:**

Two day meeting and fuels management field trip with members of FFMG, one day equipment development meeting with FEDOG, and two day wildfire management conference. First week followed by four-day fuels and fire management field trip attended by Larry Hamilton, post conference.

**Findings/Observations/Conclusions:**

Past equipment personnel exchanges have resulted in rapid technological advance in BLM

equipment development. Australian equipment development personnel continue to push the envelope in wildfire engine design, the primary wildfire suppression tool throughout BLM managed lands. Australia especially continues to investigate ways to protect equipment and personnel from burnover, primarily through the use of spray bars, reserve tanks, and heat shielding cabin curtains. While we in the U.S. have hesitated to apply these principles to engine design, not wanting to encourage firefighters to linger where they should not, we may be approaching a point where we need to reconsider "last ditch" protection measures. In wildfire aviation, a Western Australian company has perfected a new "ping pong ball" type aerial ignition device. The new device is more compact and lighter than current U.S. models, and uses a more conveniently sized and packaged ignition device. The same company has a re-designed helitorch that offers considerable advantages over current U.S. designs. The BLM should consider acquiring and testing both of these aerial ignition systems.

FFMG continues to support the exchange of fire personnel with the U.S., and is working on completing necessary work on standardizing qualifications amongst their firefighters. Attendance at their meetings, especially by high level managers such as Larry Hamilton and Jerry Williams (Director Fire and Aviation, USDA Forest Service), does much to convince Australian and New Zealand officials of the importance the U.S. places on these cooperative arrangements. The U.S. has everything to gain by encouraging Australia and New Zealand to make their fire managers available to the U.S. during the southern hemisphere winter: we are often short of qualified personnel during our peak months, a situation that shows no signs of improvement. While Australian and New Zealand firefighters are an expensive plane ride distant, their salaries, by virtue of exchange rates, are comparatively low. In short, firefighters from Australia and New Zealand are a bargain, especially considering their high qualifications and ability to fit flawlessly into our ICS organizations.

**Recommendations, Follow-up Actions:**

Both Australia and the U.S. are heavy users of single engine air tankers. Further exchange of SEAT program managers and tanker base managers might lead to positive developments in both countries.

We need to monitor FFMG progress towards standardizing their qualifications. Issues of the liabilities involved with accepting non-equivalent qualifications will continue to crop up unless Australia and New Zealand can complete this process.

High level U.S. fire managers should maintain regular, face-to-face contact with Australian counterparts. Again, help from Australia and New Zealand represents one of the best bargains in wildland fire for the U.S., and a way to compensate for aging workforces both here and there. We must make an effort to keep interest high in Australia and New Zealand. We simply cannot ignore these countries and trust that when we call, firefighters will come to our aid. We need to maintain ties with regular contact.

While Australian and New Zealand firefighters have come to the U.S. for a full fire season, official U.S. trips to Australia and New Zealand have been shorter duration. U.S. fuels and engine-based firefighters especially could benefit from a full-season experience in Australia, rather than a shorter-duration trip. Prescribed fire programs in many parts of Australia and New Zealand are aggressive and successful. U.S. fuels personnel could benefit from in depth study of programs in Australian states like WA, Victoria, and Tasmania.

**Lessons Learned for Future Assignments of this Type:**

While Australia and New Zealand resemble the U.S. in many ways, it is crucial for the American visitor to be sensitive to cultural differences. Americans are good at impressing overseas hosts as arrogant and rude, even in countries as relaxed as Australia. U.S. firefighters chosen to represent the U.S. on missions to Australia should be coached on cultural differences.

The AFAC conference is a big deal event, attended by nearly a thousand people. Americans honored by being chosen to address such a group should treat the invitation with the respect it deserves by dressing appropriately (overdressing is much less of a sin than underdressing) and preparing fully. Presenters must be sensitive to their audience: acronyms relevant to U.S. audiences only should be used sparingly with foreign audiences, or explicated. Lecture subjects should be considered carefully and presented in such a way as to have relevance for an international audience.

